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Silk Underwear for NY Swells in the Age of Victoria
By Diane Maglio

This appears to be an age of silk. The correspondent of a country paper, writing from New York, says that men are becoming very luxurious, and their... wardrobes and repositories for personal belongings display tastes more costly than those of women.... [as they put on] underwear of the softest, richest knitted silk.¹

During the last quarter of the 19th century affluent men of leisure and fashion had many hours every day to “loiter at the various clubs and discuss matters of taste.”² Those who displayed an exceptional interest in fashion were labeled “swells.” This research was inspired by a fictional character in an article that examined a day in the sartorial life of Mr. Montgomery Montmorency who was “a howling NY swell by environment and inclination.” At the start of day Mr. Montmorency’s butler “makes his own selection of his master’s suit of silk underwear and has chosen a medium weight texture in proper comport with the atmosphere. On this occasion the suit is of a fetching shade of electric blue”- compatible with the business suit of slate-blue mixed which he wears to Wall St.³ The age of silk for ultrafashionable Victorian men affected their most intimate clothing: underwear. This paper will discuss the qualities of silk fibers, cloth structures and manufacturers of underwear worn by fashionable New York “swells” under their sturdy and sober tailored suits. Silk underwear was chosen to improve the drape of trousers as well as for warmth, hygiene and health. Trade journals and fashion industry publications were studied and etiquette books, dyers sample books and silk swatches from the textile collection of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology were examined.

The American Silk Journal, 1885 reported:

Silk underwear for gentlemen ... is coming extensively into use. A few years ago it was so rare that it was but seldom found in the furnishing stores. Many of the sex now wear it all the year round ... silk underwear cost \$18 for a shirt and \$16 for drawers, or \$34 a suit. Some gentlemen order three or four suits at a time.⁴

In the Brooks Brothers Catalogue 1901, underwear from Allen Solly and other makers in all weights and qualities including silk were offered in prices up to \$15.00.⁵ In spite of its high cost, silk had unique properties which made it the prestige fiber for underwear.⁶ It had a soft hand, good absorbency, and wicking characteristics; the fiber is strong and

¹ “An Age of Silk,” *American Silk Journal*, No. 11, NY, November 1882, p. 200.

² J.P. Ritter, Jr., “Queer Things Worn By Men,” *Clothier and Furnisher* Feb. 1888, p. 37.

³ “The Obligations of a Swell,” *Clothier and Furnisher*, Sept. 1887, p. 41

⁴ *American Silk Journal*, Jan 1885, p. 22. As a point of reference the cost of a man’s silk alpaca coat in the Lord & Taylor catalogue 1881 was \$4.75

⁵ *Brooks Brothers Catalogue*, Fall 1901, p. 74.

⁶ M. David Potter and Bernard P. Corbman, *Fiber to Fabric* 3rd ed. (NY: Mc Graw Hill Book Publishing 1959), p.207.

resilient; Because of its absorbency, it is appropriate for warm-weather wear. Silk's low heat conductivity makes it also suitable for cold-weather wear.⁷

Silk underwear was manufactured from both spun and reeled silk.

If the filament of the cocoon can be unwound from it in a continuous fibre, it is 'reeled' and known in commerce as 'raw' silk [but]...if the cocoon through any cause be pressed, broken or injured so that its filament cannot be 'reeled,' then it must be 'spun'⁸

as characterized by the *American Silk Journal*. Spun silk was also classed as "waste" and included refuse or product thrown off in the process of reeling.⁹ Samuel Lister discovered silk waste by accident in a London warehouse and the owners were happy to sell it for rubbish. "It was neither agreeable to the feel, the smell, nor the touch; but simply a mass of knotty, dirty, impure stuff, full of bits of stick and dead mulberry leaves."¹⁰ Lister recognized the commercial viability of manufacturing spun silk fabric that could compete in appearance with material from the perfect cocoon.¹¹

Hollins Raynor in 1903 described one of the many machines which had to be invented before the preparatory processes of waste silk could be successfully mastered. "The cocoon beating or thrashing machine opens, softens, and renders flexible any kind of waste, and inflates the cocoons so that the work of the succeeding machines is rendered easier, and better results are attained in yield of silk and length of fibre."¹² Other special and expensive machinery was used to clean, strengthen and spin "waste" silk in the same way cotton was spun.¹³ *American Silk Journal* in 1889 reported:

Spun silk no longer hides itself behind other goods,...It claims equality on the ground that durability and uniformity make up for whatever it may be wanting in luster and beauty. The deficiency in these latter features is now very slight."¹⁴

In the early 1880s the use of spun silk was in its infancy but in 10 years it had become "a factor of no small importance."¹⁵ By 1896 a writer for the ultrafashionable audience of *Vogue* endorsed spun silk for "very cool and agreeable [men's] summer underclothing."¹⁶

George W. Mathews in an article entitled "Art in Dress" said "The true art of dressing well [for men] is to make a careful toilet every day"¹⁷ and indeed cleanliness

⁷ Sara J. Kadolph, Anna L. Langford. *Textiles 9th Ed.* (NJ: Prentice Hall 2002), p. 65.

⁸ *American Silk Journal*, Aug. 1885, p. 112

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁰ Bird, F. J. *The American Practical Dyer's Companion* (Philadelphia: Henry Carey Baird & Company 1882), p.28.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.28.

¹² Hollins Raynor. *Silk throwing and waste silk spinning.* (London: Scott, Greenwood 1903), p. 74-5.

¹³ *American Silk Journal*, Aug. 1885, p. 112.

¹⁴ *American Silk Journal*, Mar 1889, p. 46.

¹⁵ *American Silk Industry* The Rose & Trumbull co. 1893 p. 36.

¹⁶ *Vogue*, 21 May 189,6 p. 362.

¹⁷ Geo. W. Mathews, "Art in Dress," *The American Fashion Review & Tailors Journal*, Sept. 1881, P. 1.

was fundamental to sustain the rank of “swell.” Silk was considered a hygienic material because its smooth surface does not attract dirt and readily gives up any dirt when cleaned. Silk fabrics can deteriorate and stain with perspiration, and so it was beneficial that spun silk fabrics could be washed. The author of *Hints About Men’s Dress* 1888 advised: “[Under-clothing] really ought to be white ...simply because white shows that it is soiled the moment it is so...[and] silk under-wear ought to be washed by someone who knows how, lest they should shrink.”¹⁸ A new process patented in Germany for bleaching silk included the addition of a liquid alcohol of the ethylic series to achieve a silk of dazzling white, reported *American Knit Goods Review* 1899.¹⁹

Although white silk underwear signified cleanliness and good grooming, a riot of color was also important to the ultrafashionable. Under sensible outerwear Victorian men wore, “swells” wore silk underwear in seasonal color palettes. *Vogue* confirmed that spun silk underwear in yellow Shetland color was most popular²⁰ in 1896. The owner of a large and fashionable New York gentlemen’s furnishing establishment said: “I have some customers as exacting in the shades of their silk underwear as an old maid is in the trimming for her Spring bonnet. [For 1887] Purple is the new and favorite color...and all its shades down to lavender.”²¹ From American dyers sample books of 1875 and 1888 are silk shades of yellows and purples. A men’s fashion journalist also reported about color in silk underwear. “I only heard the other day a of a man whose entire outfit was in silks of rose and lavender colors embroidered in darker shades, with his initials and crest thereon.”²²

Following on the heels of colorful underwear men discovered the elegant and unostentatious black under suits.

The swells whose fancy has been given free reign
in the matter of color...need no longer *en dishabille*
resemble acrobats and circus attendants in undress uniform,
when the boon of a *distingue* silk undersuit of solid black may
be had for the buying.²³

A swell would be concerned about the graceful drape of his trousers and would appreciate smooth thin silk underwear that provided a non-static lining. A “flashlight picture” by Fredic G. Hodsoll of actor Weedon Grossmith shows a rare back view of a man’s trousers.²⁴ In *Hints About Men’s Dress* the advise was: “trousers hang better when worn over silk drawers, woollen garments having a tendency to make the trousers stick to the legs”²⁵ or cause a twisting effect as shown on the “dude” (one aspiring to rank of swell). Indeed, it was suggested

¹⁸ *Hints About Men’s Dress*, 1888, p. 20.

¹⁹ *American Knit Goods Review*, “Bleaching Silk,” Nov. 1899, p. 22.

²⁰ *Vogue*, 21 May 1896, p. 362.

²¹ “Underwear for New York Swells,” *Clothier and Furnisher*, Aug. 1887, p. 56.

²² “As Seen by Him,” *Vogue*, 19 April 1894, p. 7.

²³ “Fixings,” *Clothier and Furnisher*, Oct. 1889, p. 37-8.

²⁴ Katrin Rolley Caroline Aish, *Fashion in Photographs 1900-1920* (London, Batsford Ltd.)

²⁵ *Hints About Men’s Dress*, 1888, p. 20

If a man can not have one pair of thin, and one of thick, silk drawers..., let him prefer a thin pair. These can be worn in winter over a moderately heavy-weight pair of woolen drawers, and the set of the trousers much improved especially when underclothing “fit pretty snugly.”²⁶

In the costume collection of the Hereford City Museum, England are men’s ankle length drawers in pink silk stockinet.²⁷ Stockinet is a plain weft knit fabric worked in stocking stitch with all the loops on one face of the fabric with the two faces being dissimilar as explained by Irene Emory. The reverse side has a rough surface²⁸ and so is usually napped on the back to produce a soft texture²⁹ which would feel soft and comfortable next to the skin. The *Mercury Dictionary of Textile Terms* said: stockinet is “often produced on a multi-feeder circular latch needle machine and extensively used for making garments of the cut-up class to sell at a moderate cost.”³⁰ The two head web frame of the Crane Manufacturing Co. was especially adapted for making stockinet.

Using silk fiber would increase the cost of the garment while still offering a thin smooth pair of under drawers. Dr. Jaeger, creator and champion of the Sanitary Woolen System, promoted the use of protein fiber in preference to cellulose fiber. He reported that he carefully investigated the properties of the other natural protein fiber, silk. In regard to the relation of fiber “to the odorous principles, it occupies the same position as vegetable fiber fabrics.”³¹ A cotton garment could become saturated with perspiration and cling to the skin keeping the person wet and chilled. Experts advocated animal fibers for their absorbent properties which “takes up the moisture and so cleanses the body and removes products of excretion that are depressing and poisonous.”³²

In a revised edition of essays Dr. Jaeger elaborated on silk fiber. On the positive side it was the equal of wool as a non-conductor of heat and electricity but negatively

it is the inferior of wool, It is not so *warm* in winter not so *cool* in summer. This is due to the fact that it has not the repulsion for water, nor the attraction for vapor, that wool has, nor the affinity for air-properties and condition so ingeniously combined, and adapted to the physiology of the human skin.³³

His concern in the composition of silk was “a nitrogenized substance called *serecine* ... the chief substance of spider’s thread”³⁴ which contributed to unsanitary apparel implied Dr. Jaeger. Other medical scientists disagreed with Dr. Jaeger regarding the healthful

²⁶ *Hints About Men’s Dress*, 1888, p. 22.

²⁷ C. Willett & Phillis Cunningham, *The History of Underclothes* (London: Michael Joseph 1951), p. 141 Fig. 63.

²⁸ Irene Emory, *The Primary Structure of Fabrics* (Washington DC: Watson-Guption Publications) p. 40-1.

²⁹ *Callaway Textile Dictionary*, 1947, p. 344.

³⁰ *The Mercury Dictionary of Textile Terms*, p.479.

³¹ *Dr. Jaeger’s Sanitary Woolen System*, p. 84.

³² *American Silk Journal*, July 1883, p. 112.

³³ *Dr. Jaegers Sanitary Woolen System* 2nd ed, p. 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 103.

attributes of silk underwear. Reports in the *American Silk Journal* 1883 highly praised silk because it “resists the spread of contagious diseases that are rapidly and alarmingly reproduced wherever plant fiber takes up and carry the offensive odors emanating from the sick chamber”³⁵

American Knit Goods Review 1901 wrote of the consistent popularity of fleece goods for underwear.

While [flat goods] are certainly more desirable garments possessing healthful properties lacking in [fleece], they nevertheless do not show the same value in appearance and weight; therefore flat goods will probably remain in the background, as has been the case since the advent of fleeces.³⁶

Fleece fabric is a weft-insertion jersey where an additional yarn is laid into a course as it is being knit. The laid in yarn provides strength, stability, and may be used to produce a nap during finishing for comfort next to the skin.³⁷ Royal Silk Plush undergarments claimed to offer

Warmth without irritation... The construction of the fabric is such that the cold does not penetrate, and the silk plush on the underside causes a friction that warms the body without disturbing the sensitive properties of the cuticle.³⁸

Plush has at least a 1/4” high pile fleece. The friction produced by the silk fiber and fabric structure were believed to have curative benefits.

Silk, we think, has the advantage by affording electrical conditions conducive to a strong, regular, and equal circulation of the blood to the extremities, as well as to all parts of the body. Experience has demonstrated that silk underclothing will in some cases cure, and in all mitigate the pains of rheumatism, neuralgia and nervous diseases of many kinds.³⁹

Edward B. Lent wrote an amusing account of a rheumatic’s many efforts to find a cure.

‘The minute I put that shirt on,’ said he, ‘I could feel a tingling sensation all over. This must have been some peculiar electrical effect of the raw silk. In less than a day all pain left me, never to return.... Now I

³⁵ *American Silk Journal*, July 1883, p 112.

³⁶ *American Knit Goods Review*, “Knit-Goods Market,” Sept. 1901, p. 19.

³⁷ Sara J. Kadelph, Anna L. Langford. *Textiles 9th Ed.* (NJ: Prentice Hall 2002), p. 225

³⁸ *Clothier and Furnisher*, Sept. 1898, p. 61.

³⁹ *American Silk Journal*, July 1883, p. 112.

have all my sheets, pillow-cases, pajamas and underwear made of this material. It is a sure cure.”⁴⁰

It was believed that static electricity would brace up the nervous system and silk had properties that generated electricity.⁴¹ The Halcyon Knitting Mills of Cohoes, NY capitalized on the claim by scientists that “silk is the best article to be worn next to the skin” and registered a trademark “Electric Silk Fleeced Underwear.”⁴²

Machines were also sold to stimulate the nervous system and cure all manner of ailments. The D. C. Moorehead machine was an electromagnet machined designed to benefit diseases classified under Nervous Complaints: “among which are ..., Rheumatism, acute and chronic: ...[and] General Debility and Deficiency of Nervous and Physical energy.”⁴³ Machines were marketed to achieve similar results as the wearing of silk fleece underwear.

The Wright’s Health Underwear goods were advertised as having inner fleecings of silk or wool. The company offered a snug body fit which was an essential feature of a winter garment to “preserve the natural body heat.”⁴⁴ Sears Roebuck and Co. sold Dr. Wrights Health Union suit, with an outer surface of cotton and inside surface of fine Australian Wool, but with edges bound in silk and priced at \$1.75 for volume consumption. Silk played a more important part in men’s and women’s underwear than appeared since many grades were “invariably trimmed in silk no matter what the material may be comprising the fabric.”⁴⁵

In the textile collection of the Museum at FIT is a group of fancy silk knit swatches with the label of the manufacturer, E. Richard. Meinig and Co. attached. The company was organized in 1905 in Berks County Pa. for the manufacture of silk gloves, hosiery and underwear for men and women.⁴⁶ Meinig had the unique distinction among Berk County businesses due to their involvement in all three of the main textile trades of the area.⁴⁷ The collection consists of eleven examples of ivory colored knits in assorted patterns with no indication of the intended end use: men or women or both. A geometric pattern is smooth, soft and thin.

Gassing the hairy spun silk yarn could duplicate the smoothness of reeled silk. The projecting fibers and general hairiness can be removed by passing over a gassing and cleaning machine. “The more free from projecting fibres and rough thick places a silk can be produced, the more valuable it becomes, because of its smoothness and consequent

⁴⁰ Edward B. Lent, *Being done good; an amusing account of a rheumatic’s experiences with doctors and specialists who promised to do him good* (Brooklyn, NY: The Brooklyn Eagle Press c1904), p. 97-8

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 218.

⁴² *American Knit-Goods Review Special Ed.*, Dec. 1900, p. 73.

⁴³ Margaret C. S. Christman *1846: Portrait of the Nation* National Portrait Gallery Smithsonian Institute: Washington DC 1996 p. 85 “Moorhead’s Improved Graduated Magnetic Machines,” by Richard C. Major.

⁴⁴ *Clothier and Furnisher*, Sept. 1898, p. 61.

⁴⁵ *American Knit Goods Review*, April 1902, p. 31.

⁴⁶ James L. Holton, *50 Golden Years: The Full Fashioned Hosiery Industry Berks County, Pa.* (Reading Pa: Schuylkill River Greenway Assn. 1993), p.54.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.54.

lustre.”⁴⁸ The gassing machine removed hairy fibers from the surface of spun silk to increase smoothness and value.

An open structure fabric was thought to contribute to the comfort of men’s underwear.

Whatever an under vest may be made of, its real value as a protector from cold depends upon its ability to enclose with its meshes a certain density of air. This is indeed the most important function of undergarments, viz.: to encircle the whole body with an envelope of warm air.

wrote the *Clothier and Furnisher*.⁴⁹ The reporter continues to say that the best of all natural fibers to guarantee the wearer against loss of heat is silk. This silk knit has an open mesh pattern and is lightweight. The *American Knit Goods Review* advocated “A lightweight garment, with large meshes, [would be] more effective against cold than a close heavy one.”⁵⁰ Openwork fabric was believed to “[govern] the passage of warmth from or to the body.”⁵¹

American manufacturers of silk knit underwear were reported to be steadily growing by 1883 and a demand for silk grew in both domestic and foreign manufacture.⁵² The Holmes Co., Boston, MA achieved a notable reputation for the manufacture of jersey fitting union undergarments, full-fashioned for men, in silk and other fibers which they sold direct. A patent filed August 1892 for a combination knitted undergarment was assigned to John Holmes, treasurer of the Holmes Knitting Co. The Brooklyn Knitting Co. of 24 Fifth Ave., NY was “catching the cream of the trade in the way of silk underwear. These goods are all of domestic make, but are far superior to anything that line ever imported.”⁵³

Silk was also an important component in mixtures with wool or cotton. Sears sold a men’s 75% worsted and 25% silk union suit in full winter weight in light blue. The *Clothier and Furnisher* reported:

Among the most successful makers of high grade underwear leading the market this season is the Holroyd derby ribbed, in both wool and pure silk, and their combination, for which Wilson Brothers, of Chicago, are the sole agents in America. It comes a high a \$22 per suit, wholesale as is to be had in twelve colors.⁵⁴

140. ⁴⁸ Hollins Raynor. *Silk throwing and waste silk spinning* (London: Scott, Greenwood 1903), p.

⁴⁹ *Clothier and Furnisher*, Jan 1889, p.74.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 74.

⁵¹ *American Knit Goods Review*, Sept. 1901, p. 19.

⁵² *American Silk Journal*, Dec. 1883, p. 200.

⁵³ *Clothier and Furnisher*, Nov. 1888, p. 40.

⁵⁴ *Clothier and Furnisher*, July 1888, p. 56

In the expensive grades of underwear vicuna and silk mixed wools endeavored to keep up in elegance and cost with some of the magnificent pure knit silk undersuitings which it was also possible to obtain.⁵⁵

Woven silk fabrics were also promoted for healthful underwear by the *American Silk Journal* May 1897.

An English mill is manufacturing a most acceptable novelty in the form of silk flannel. ... It is a combination of silk and wool, ...particularly well adapted to winter underclothing...and has the additional merits of being anti-rheumatic, combining the hygienic and washing merits of silk.⁵⁶

Whether Swells chose thin silk for summer or silk-fleeced and silk plush for winter warmth, ultrafashionable men indulged their love of luxury and concern for health by means of the silk underwear they wore. "What kind of men are they who wear this finery? Some of them are manly enough, who like fine and pretty clothes as honestly and genuinely as any young girl does...Some like delicate and fancy underwear because of the pleasure it gives them to say they are the finest money can buy."⁵⁷ To wrap up the story of Mr. Montmorency "for with the adroitness of the true swell he has acquired the art of concealing the effort"⁵⁸ - and that included his electric blue silk underwear.

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⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 56

⁵⁶ *American Silk Journal*, May 1897.

⁵⁷ "Underwear for New York Swells," *Clothier and Furnisher*, Aug. 1887, p. 56.

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